Draft summary
Consultation on the OU’s tutorial booking system
27 October – 5 November 2017
The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the forum.

Record of contributions
There were 320 posts by students; 56 students made at least 1 post and 27 students made 5 or more posts. There were 237 ratings. The most liked posts are shown below.

Informed:- StudentHome (if that's still available) - failing that, if not down, main OU website.
For anything other than a brief outage, email /Social media

Info:- What is unavailable / Likely timescale / What you (the student) can do, and where to go for help if it's causing major problems / What the university is doing to avoid students being unduly disadvantaged (eg re. iCMA submission, automatically extending deadline). / Info on Special Circs forms if it's likely to affect people significantly (eg a day's outage in revision period for an online only module can be catastrophic for some)

Updates:- If anything changes in projected time - immediately it is known. Otherwise, every couple of hours during the day - even just to say ‘we are still working on it’.

As an area for finding out things about your module then the new environment is mostly OK except for the mild panic trying to find the TMA submission button because it's not with the assessment stuff linked to the study planner and then remembering to go to the Assessment tab and not scroll the submit option off the top of the screen.

As an environment for reading through the on-line only material sequentially it is also quite nice, but... THE KING HAS GOT NO CLOTHES...as a learning environment for on-line only material where you need to flick back and forth it is absolutely useless.

Please don’t ‘brighten up’ StudentHome. Dull and functional is what we need. StudentHome absolutely does NOT need to have a makeover. We absolutely do NOT need some garish trendy inaccessible, hard to use monstrosity replacing the current StudentHome. Too much of that has already made its way onto the OU’s web pages.

Responses to feedback sent through the IT support desk for example can be very prompt, but it can sometimes seem like they haven’t actually read what has been written past the first couple of words!
Q1: Feedback from you about IT services

We are keen to receive feedback from students on how our IT systems are working for you. How would you like to provide that feedback to us?

Students suggested the following ways to feedback on IT systems:

- Online forms, possibly including multiple choice questions or dropdown selections, possibly with a word limit.
- Via email (where guidelines may need to be provided about what to include in the email).
- Simple feedback button on every page, similar to module website, or option to ‘make a suggestion’.
- ‘Like’ buttons for individual pages.
- ‘Report’ button for when pages are not working as they should.
- Email address to contact if a particular site goes down.
- ‘Resolution centre’ where you can raise an issue and see progress or conclusion to previous issues you have logged.
- Discussion forum linked to from the feedback button where you can see an answer at a later point and see previous issues raised by students and a response to these.
- The facility to say ‘no what I meant was’ if your feedback has been wrongly interpreted.
- Pop-up box surveys – but these should not be every time you log in and should be very short.
- Multiple text message surveys would not be popular.
- Anonymous questionnaires which should be specific to particular systems or websites and objectively worded with room for free text.
- Feedback mechanisms that allow students to keep an acknowledged copy of the issue they have raised so they can follow it up if necessary.
- The option to demonstrate accessibility problems through screen sharing using Skype or similar.
- Facebook and Twitter
- Printed survey.

It was pointed out that any feedback mechanism must be simple and available to make it as easy as possible for students to provide feedback ‘in the moment’. This would be more effective than lengthy surveys.

Many students said that it was important that feedback was acknowledged in the first instance and later responded to including what action the University was taking as a result of the feedback and if no action, why not.

Other suggestions included:

- A noticeboard for informing students of action taken in response to feedback.
- Responses should outline any obstacles to acting on feedback as students may be able to offer solutions.
- Emails to individuals about small problems raised, responses on module websites or StudentHome for larger issues.

One student pointed out that it was difficult to know how to provide general feedback to the OU if you didn’t know which part of the University was responsible, for example they would like different, less repetitive hold music when you ring up and have a long wait, but it wasn’t clear who they could feed this back to.

Q2: IT service availability

What are your views on the availability of our IT services? Please consider in particular:

a. StudentHome

b. Your module website in our VLE

The majority of feedback on this question was positive. There was some confusion about what this question was referring to but the general message from the consultation was that availability of IT services was quite good, although a minority of students had experienced issues, in particular an incident in early summer 2016 was referred to. Students also felt notification of planned maintenance was reasonable.

Several students gave positive feedback about the Computing Helpdesk while some others raised concern about the accessibility of IT services.

Other comments made:

- It is not always clear, consistent or straightforward to know how to access IT support
- It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a problem is with the OU systems or closer to home.
- A direct link on StudentHome to IT help and advice would be useful alongside SST and tutor details.
• If module websites or Library access are unavailable close to assignment deadlines then this can be very problematic and stressful. Needing to submit a special circumstances form added to the stress.
• There is sometimes a long delay between services being unavailable unexpectedly or for longer than notified and students being updated on social media about what’s going on.
• When something is not available an answer is needed urgently, not within two to five working days. This is particularly critical when uploading TMAs and around exam dates.
• There were more ‘glitches’ than might be expected for an organisation the size of the OU.
• There was an expectation that availability was being monitored with targets to be met.
• Maintenance seems to be reasonably well flagged in advance, although students accessing their module website direct may miss messages on StudentHome.
• Sometimes it is difficult to know where to find particular items.
• It would be good to have a link on every page to enable students to get in touch to resolve problems.
• Clear advice and updates on availability are helpful.
• There was an expectation that Twitter would be used to update on availability.
• The decision not to outsource IT was welcomed.
• Sometimes there was a delay in receiving notifications of new posts in a forum.
• Sometimes it took a little while for items such as banked assignment scores to be updated.
• More student input into the pros and cons of StudentHome and the dashboard might be useful.
• Adobe Connect appears to be easier to download than Blackboard.

Q3: IT service availability

How can we improve our communications around planned systems updates? Please consider:

- a. How we notify you
- b. How much warning we give
- c. What information we give you

Under question 2 there was generally positive feedback about the information currently provided.

In this question there was strong support for at least a week’s notification of major updates via email. However, there were a significant minority of students who would not appreciate extra emails and preferred a news item on a relevant website. There was also a suggestion that the length and impact of the maintenance should determine if an email was needed, for example 48-hour impact on all systems or something specifically affecting the assignment submission. Some would like more notice if there was maintenance that could, for example, affect assignment submission or may have a major impact on how they study.

There was some, but less, support for text messaging the same information and for sending reminders immediately before and after any downtime. Several students did not agree with these suggestions and said they would want to opt out of texts and perhaps emails, if that were possible. Another suggestion was that students should be able to opt in to more detailed information and reminders by text or email.

Suggestions for information included in notifications included:

- A timeline of what to expect when
- What would or would not be available during the period in question
- The expected outcome of any upgrade if it would have a noticeable impact
- Whether other arrangements will need to be made for submission of assignments
- Advice on what students could do in preparation, for example downloading material.

Information should be summarised and to the point so that students could easily take in relevant information. Other points made:

- An easy to access IT noticeboard might be useful on a separate server listing the availability of various OU sites and systems, any timetable for maintenance or restoration of service, and including the ability to report issues, that students could refer to in case of lack of availability. Similar to downrightnow.com.
- One student was concerned that he had not been sufficiently notified about changes to the dashboard.
- Several students were ‘distressed’ about the new dashboard and were encouraged to use the feedback feature.
- If downtime will affect module sites, post a news message on those sites.
- Put a systems downtime notification on StudentHome, the dashboard and/or the login page
- Put a banner on every page of the site for a week beforehand giving downtime dates
- Consider the placement, wording and design of the news area on StudentHome and other pages to make it more noticeable
• Planned maintenance notifications sometimes disappeared down the list – some sort of colour coding or pinning system might be helpful, although other students would want the option to dismiss these messages.
• It would be helpful if all students were reminded that they needed to regularly check StudentHome.
• A dialogue box that would need to be clicked away to acknowledge it’s been seen might be useful although there may be accessibility issues.
• A calendar with systems updates highlighted might be useful.
• An unplanned or short notice outage might warrant an email notification.

Q4: Communication about IT incidents

How to improve communication about IT incidents (when systems go down unexpectedly or become unreliable).

If we have an IT incident that means the systems you use are unavailable (for example, your module website or where you submit your TMAs), how would you like to be informed about this? Please consider:

• How we notify you
• What information we give you
• How frequent updates you would expect if the issue cannot be resolved quickly
• After an IT incident, would you be interested in an explanation of what caused it and how we are working to prevent a reoccurrence and how would you like to receive this information?

Many of the points made here reflected those made for question three:

• Mode of communication should depend on the scale and impact – for example for a module website being down, directly affected students should be emailed. StudentHome would be sufficient for brief outage or less well used areas. Or if StudentHome is out, an email may be necessary.
• Timely social media should be used to inform and update students
• An IT bulletin board separate to the main IT systems should be available and well advertised for updates
• There should be the option of opting into or out of direct messages including email and text
• A brief description of what is going on would be welcomed including systems affected and a timescale.
• Information provided should include advice on what action to take in particular circumstances, for example to submit a TMA by email if the usual system was unavailable or that a deadline would be extended in light of the disruption, or where students could find help in particular circumstances.
• Email overload should be avoided where possible and email subject matter should be very clear.
• Generally students only wanted information that was directly relevant to their studies, such as what systems were unavailable and progress on fixing them.

There were mixed views about whether information after an IT incident about what went wrong should be provided. Some thought it was important, others that it was not necessary, although some would find it interesting. It was suggested this might be best on StudentHome so it was available for interested students.

Some students felt that daily updates would be about right, whereas others suggested an initial communication when the incident began followed by one when it was resolved would be sufficient. Another suggestion was updates when there was any change or something new to report. Updates could be more frequent if not using a direct channel and could depend on the scale and impact of the problem.

Other points and suggestions:

• YouTube could be used for video messages from staff about what systems are or are not available and an explanation.
• Information about special circumstances form should be provided if appropriate.
• Concern about whether the email system is capable of contacting all students in a timely fashion.
• Impact was an important factor – a 30 minute outage in the middle of the night did not require a direct email.
• There may be a security concern about giving out too much information about what had gone wrong and how it was being / had been fixed.
• There should be an ‘error’ message available if something isn’t working so students know it isn’t ‘their’ problem. Preferably this should include a timescale (estimated if needed) for the problem to be fixed.
• A phone number for these situations might be useful, with a recorded message updating on the issue.
• The page at https://help.open.ac.uk/known-technical-issues could be useful but is hard to find.
• StudentHome could be used for ‘System status alerts’ with red / amber / green flags. For red / amber systems there should be a brief summary of what’s happening, when more information will be provided and how long the problem is expected to last.
• A blog system could be used to update on issues after the problem had been resolved.
• Breach of security or data loss may require an urgent email with detailed actions to take.
Q5: Qualification and module registration process

This question is about how we can improve the qualification and module registration process on the OU website...

a. Ease of navigation

Some students found the site attractive and easy to navigate. Others felt it was easier to find information when it was all on one page, partly because you could use the find function; some people may not realise you need to click on the tabs for additional information and scrolling can be easier than flicking between tabs.

Other points:

- Some pages have been ‘restyled’ and others not so it can feel disjointed.
- Insufficiently warm and welcoming.
- Works better if you know what you want to do rather than just browsing.
- One international student used the ‘England’ site as some relevant information is not available otherwise.

b. Whether it gives you the right information to inform your study decision

Several students felt there was not enough in depth information to inform their study decision. (See e.)

Some students commented that they needed to talk to their Student Support Team to get the information they needed.

The layout can be confusing particularly with regard to diplomas and certificates. It would be helpful if lists could be grouped by subject area.

Other than the Open Degree, qualifications offering BA or BSc do not have sufficient information explaining why they have these categories.

c. Whether it allows you to register and pay easily

There was a lot of positive feedback for this element of the question. Other points include:

- One student commented that the process was less straightforward outside of particular pathways: ‘Heaven forbid though that I should want to self-fund a zero credit module for fun during my four month summer break because “you are already enrolled on a degree pathway!”’
- It was suggested that the process of paying via student loan could be more clearly explained, with step-by-step guidance, by the OU before you start, for example information about what documents you will need well in advance.
- The process was repetitive and it would be nice if the system was able to ‘remember’ you from previous use.
- Because of needing to pay shortly after registration, there was no incentive to register early. It would be good to register early and then pay nearer to module start.
- It was not always clear why sometimes you could register and pay online and other times it required a phonecall. This was problematic when there was a long wait on the phones near the registration deadline and being told call backs would be after the deadline was unhelpful.
- A couple of students mentioned particular problems when trying to register for a subsequent qualification, which the system didn’t seem geared up for.
- Registration is difficult when there are multiple payment methods and requires a phonecall.
- The word ‘free’ should be used carefully as it may refer to choice rather than cost!

d. How easy it was to find

There was positive feedback for this element of the question.

e. What improvements could be made?

There was strong support for being able to look through module materials, even if time-limited, to see if the module would suit them – the tasters on OpenLearn are unable to capture this. Samples on the Maths and Stats qualification site were cited as good practice.

Students would like more detailed module descriptions, in particular with regard to content and assessment. This might include:

- What content will be covered
- More precise detail about skills covered (not ‘you will improve your skills’ which is unknowable)
- Whether properly formatted print versions are readily available.
- What compulsory or assessed elements there are with reference to collaborative work and reflection
- Details of the assessment methods and strategy such as that available on the science qualifications forum and including what type of assessment could be expected on which week of the module.
- Clear indication of pre-requisite knowledge including links to support skills that are essential for the course (such as spreadsheet use, statistics, referencing or essay writing).
- Disability information.
- Clear information about progression, for example if particular modules are pre-requisites for something else or is an excluded combination because of duplicated content.
- Links to similar modules.
- A timetable / planner to give an idea of study intensity
- An indication of when the module will cease to be available.
- A video about the module including staff introduction and student perceptions.

For qualifications this might include:

- More detailed descriptions of module options at Levels two and three, easily accessible.

Other suggestions:

- Better access to information for people who want to take standalone modules.
- Preference for the old format where you could jump from one section to the next.
- An option to ‘view as one page’ might be helpful.
- Lots of hyperlinks for those who have difficulty searching online.
- There should be unified design.
- Have pre-filled forms for returning students.
- Introduce an ability to select a preferred payment option.
- In ‘choose your module’ delete modules you have already completed and highlight the next natural choice.
- The ability to filter lists of modules by particular criteria.
- Introduce a checklist (possibly pop-up) to take you through the registration and fee payment process.
- Open feedback forms are better than closed questions.
- Summarised scenarios of different career paths linked to the module and skills would be helpful.
- The flexibility of Open Degrees could be better explained and promoted, potentially including a chatty and welcoming video explaining the advantages.
- Make it clearer when registering when the OU study year starts to make it easier to apply for student finance.
- There should be more advertising targeting young people, particularly on social media and university choice websites.
- The website should be more attractive and colourful, with more images and videos of young people including testimonials from current students and graduates.
- Some students need an emailed confirmation of registration and payment including fee.
- More student reviews of modules and qualifications would be useful and should be encouraged.
- Module pages should make you excited and look forward to studying that module.
- Video reviews from students about modules or qualifications or what it’s like to attend a tutorial or a residential school would be helpful.
- Individual schools provide different advice forums and samples of module material to better inform module choice. It would be good to agree some minimum standards.
- Face-to-face course choice events were helpful.

Q6: StudentHome
We would like to hear your views on how we can we improve your StudentHome experience. Please consider and include your views on:

a. How easy the space is to navigate
b. How easy the information provided is to understand
c. To what extent the home page covers all the information you regularly require
d. What would you change and why
e. What you like about it and why

There was lots of positive feedback about StudentHome as it currently is, easy to navigate and meets student needs, with a strong message that any change should not be too substantial.

Positive feedback
Everything in one place
Option to view in mobile or desktop view
Option to ‘collapse’ what’s not needed.
Easy to navigate
Comprehensive
Enables you to do everything you need to.
Clear
Functional
No excess ‘fluff’
Easy to understand.
News and notifications are helpful
Personal list of favourite links are helpful
The ‘personal blog’ is helpful as an online, secure, accessible space.

Issues
- There is some duplication with different sets of links leading to the same thing, sometimes in different places, which can be confusing at first.
- The search function is a problem – search through the Help Centre is better.
- Doesn’t include forums and what you haven’t read.
- Tabs can be confusing and unnecessary.
- Links aren’t always where you expect them to be.
- Sometimes easy to miss things as there is a lot of information; a bit cluttered.
- Looks a bit dated and dull
- The middle section is quite empty but takes up a lot of space for research students.
- Some information is obsolete, for example Access to your VLE based personal blog, Calendar, Virtual Research Environment link, Outlook Web Access (should be Office 365)

Suggestions for change
- There should be a box of links for the Students Association, including various parts of their work including PLEXUS the LGBT Plus group.
- Make more important links stand out.
- Fix minor accessibility coding error: When the user has their browser set to display pages in their own choice of colours, the links for collapsing and expanding the menu subsections in the left hand column disappear. This will be because they are coded as background images in CSS instead of being coded correctly as content in HTML elements.
- Consider a cosmetic update, although several students suggested a preference for dull and functional.
- Better search function.
- More customisable for example the ability to drag and drop sections to where you would find them most useful.

Other feedback
There was some preference for the old dashboard over the new dashboard where the size of image and the inability to move things around were issues. It was suggested there should be a return to the old dashboard with the addition of a news ticker.

Q7: Your module content online

We would like to hear your views on how we can we improve your module content online. Please consider and include your views on:

a. How easy the space is to navigate
b. How easy the information provided is to understand
c. To what extent the space covers all of the information you require
d. What would you change and why
e. What you like about it and why

There was lots of positive feedback about the new module website layout with a minority of students preferring the old design. However there was some concerns raised that it was not always possible to download high quality printable content that enabled productive off-screen study alongside onscreen content.

Some of the issues raised referred to individual module sites and may not be common across all modules.
Positive feedback

- Easy to access via Kindle Fire
- Nice and clear
- Useful to be able to tick off
- Some students found it easier to download all the resources than the previous site.
- Being able to download and print all TMA information is helpful.
- Forums are much nicer to look at.
- The light blue background for forum posts is welcome for some.
- Resources section very comprehensive.
- Like the arrows to assist navigation and the next for logical sequence.
- Bright and cheerful, is easy to use
- Some students liked the different tabs.
- Talking book facility is helpful.
- Audio and video easy to use and navigate.
- Useful to include links to other forums.
- ‘I like that I can find what I need especially as I find technology quite daunting’
- Consistent
- Modern, fresh and more efficient.
- The option of either seeing the work one week at a time or from week to week is a great thing.
- Nice to see all the key elements on one page.
- The progress bar is a useful indicator.
- The assessment deadlines stand out well.
- Having booked tutorials integrated into the study planner and having an events calendar is helpful.
- Hyperlinks to assignments on study planner are helpful.
- The feedback button is welcome.

Issues

Some themes emerged:

- There can be a lot of clicking to do, more than previously, with everything ‘hidden’ behind separate tabs.
- Some things are hard to find; examples given include exam information, printable assignment booklet, assignment scores, TMA submission button.
- There was a concern about knowing how long each study section is – some online pages are just a couple of paragraphs, others are full of activities and questions which makes it hard to judge and pace your workload.
- Explanation can lack depth and may be too condensed.
- There is a need to work between multiple tabs, or refer back and forth in the material, which is difficult.
- There appears to be a lot of ‘wasted space’ in the margins.

Other issues raised by students in relation to modules they have studied:

- On the forums it is less obvious which posts reply to which posts, harder to navigate around, and you can’t mark posts read without opening a thread. Forum messages with long links get hidden behind the edges of the text boxes and difficult to read
- Search boxes are unclear about which parts of the website they are searching and there is no explanation that they need to be ‘enabled’.
- News is hidden in a corner
- Tables don’t fit in their boxes on some tablets and need scrolling so you can’t see things at a glance.
- On the old site you could see at a glance whether and where there were new posts. The unread posts were much easier to access, you could jump straight from one forum to the next instead of having to go back to dashboard (to avoid the forums page which needs too much scrolling).
- There’s often a long lag between typing and text appearing so the text gets messed up.
- The need to use different browsers for different activities adds complication.
- Because the resources section is so comprehensive, the ‘essential help’ lower down could be missed.
- Keeps defaulting to the week tab.
- When text refers to a diagram, table or equation by number, you have no idea which section you need to go back to, or open in a separate tab from the left hand navigation area, and you end up scrolling through each to find the first or last item so you can compare its number and decide whether you need to open another section. If you View as a single page, and scan the page, many of the landmark diagrams are replaced by ‘Link not available in this view’.
- It is unhelpful in the single page view not to know what type of ‘interactive feature’ is referred to.
- Tutorials shouldn’t be listed in the events calendar when they are no longer available.
- Sometimes the ‘show transcript’ option disappears when the video has loaded.
- Captions sometimes appeared in the wrong place, not on the video, making them difficult to read.
- It is unclear the difference between ‘pdf version’ and ‘pdf version of web pages’.

**Suggestions for improvement**

The main thing students wanted was a readily available version of the materials that was designed for print. There was also support for making the view of the study planner more customisable and including more hyperlinks.

- Block guides should have pdf copies available.
- Several students wanted the option of check boxes for the resources section to keep track of what you have read / visited.
- Do an audit of the printable material, including transcripts, before the site opens to ensure it is all available and not missing or hidden.
- Ensure that all dates showing are clear and not displaying a range when there is a specific deadline.
- Video and audio should all be available online as well as OU anywhere / CD or DVD
- Include more hyperlinks
- An assignment table with scores and deadlines like the previous site would be useful.
- Include direct link to assessment strategy, tutorials and and study record.
- Make the study planner customisable to show which week you are studying if you are ahead or behind.
- Make sure that all online material are clearly identifiable for referencing purposes.
- All media should work correctly on Macs as well as Windows PCs.
- The ‘All weeks’ setting should be remembered for individuals who prefer it.
- Enable users to go straight to particular units rather than via particular weeks.
- Include guidance for how to get the best out of the search function.
- Would be helpful if some of the resources could be split out into more sections.
- It would be helpful to print all the TMA information as a single document.
- Printables should be designed in and resourced properly so they work for students.
- The image and progress bar should take up less space.
- An option to pin certain news items would be helpful.
- There should be the option to tick your tutor group tutorials.
- There should be a link at the end of each unit to take you direct to the next unit.
- The ‘Submit assignments’ button should be available from the main page.
- Introduce an option to hide forums you don’t want to see.
- Any flagged posts should be visible on the main forums tab.
- Give student the opportunity to adjust margins to increase the size of the central space.
- Make the exercises stand out more.
- Make the links on the left hand side and at the top scroll with you as you scroll down so you know what unit you are on.